



House Select Committee on Homeland Security **Democrats**

JIM TURNER, Ranking Member

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TURNER PRAISES LOCAL RESPONSE, QUESTIONS ADEQUACY OF FEDERAL ACTION

Congressman Jim Turner (D-TX), Ranking Member of the House Select Committee on Homeland Security, today expressed his concern about the delay in testing of a potentially lethal biological agent delivered by mail to the Tyler County Courthouse by a Texas inmate. In letters sent to the United States Postal Service (USPS) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Turner requested a review of the procedures handling suspected cases of bioterrorism.

“The Tyler County Sheriff, Woodville Police Chief, County Hospital Administrator, court officials and other first responders performed extremely well in this case. Although it proved to be a hoax, I’m assured that their decisive action would have saved lives,” stated Turner. “They did everything they were supposed to do.”

On October 22, several officials at the Woodville Courthouse received two letters containing a white powder with an enclosed note indicating that the substance was ricin. Ricin is a biological toxin that can cause death within 48 hours of exposure. There is no known treatment. During the incident, local responders followed established protocols for notifying federal and state authorities, and secured the health and safety of those potentially exposed to the toxin. The subsequent investigation revealed the incident to be a hoax perpetrated by a prisoner in a Texas correctional facility.

Turner followed the case as it unfolded and discovered several inconsistencies in the federal government’s planning, preparedness, and response to the Woodville incident.

Specifically cited in the letters:

- The USPS failed to advise the City of Houston Health Department lab that samples of the suspected toxin were being brought in for sampling. As a result, the lab was closed when the samples arrived, and testing was delayed. It is unclear where the sample was kept overnight.

- At no time did the USPS advise the FBI that a federal crime may have been committed.
- The City of Houston Health Department lab lacked the capability to test for ricin. The lab contacted the CDC to find out what they should do with the sample. By the end of the business day, no one from the CDC had responded to the lab's inquiry. The CDC also failed to notify the FBI of an alleged ricin attack.

“Two years after the national anthrax attack, our federal agencies ought to have a better plan for how to handle a bioterror threat sent through the mail. Each federal agency should know exactly what it should do, and how it should work with others.”

“We can't afford delay in situations like these—especially when dealing with a toxin that can kill in 48 hours. We have to treat every incident like this as a dangerous situation until we know for certain otherwise. The first responders in Woodville did an admirable job. To ensure safety in these cases, the responsible federal agencies must have a clear protocol that is promptly implemented,” stated Turner.

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